



Home: The Sacred and the Profane in John McGahern's Novel *That They May Face the Rising Sun*

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Abstract. The article seeks to answer the question what it is about the place which is called home in John McGahern's novel *That They May Face the Rising Sun* (2002), i.e. what it is that substantiates it and being in it and a return to it. It argues that the homeplace in the narrative of the novel is defined by two symbolic planes: home is not only a physical and material and social place/ space within a certain geography in the novel, but also is of the ontological structure which is the meeting point of two trajectories that cross over: one of them is the vertical – the sacred, the other is the horizontal – the profane. The sacred puts into communication the three placial / spatial geographies in the narrative – heaven, earth and underworld; the profane marks the historical and the linear. It is within the homeplace in the narrative of the novel that existential being opens up through the tensions between the sacred and the profane. To build the argument, the paper draws on Mircea Eliade's hermeneutics in *The Sacred and the Profane* (1959), *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return* (1954), and *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism* (1961).

Keywords: home, the sacred, the profane.

Namai Johno McGahern'o romane „Veidu į tekančią saulę“

Santrauka. Straipsnyje siekiama atsakyti į klausimą, kas yra namai, namų erdvė Johno McGahern'o romane „Veidu į tekančią saulę“ (angl. *That They May Face the Rising Sun*): ar namai yra fizinė, materialinė, daiktiška vieta / erdvė tam tikroje apibrėžtoje geografinėje, ar namų prigimties esmę sudaro jų ontologinė struktūra, ir jei viena, ir kita, koks tada yra jų santykis, ir kas substancijuoja šią sąjungą. Straipsnyje remiamasi rumunų filosofo, religijotyrininko, religijų teoretiko Mircea Eliade darbais („Šventybė ir pasaulietiskumas“ (angl. *The Sacred and the Profane*), „Amžinojo sugrįžimo mitas“ (angl. *The Myth of the Eternal Return*), „Įvaizdžiai ir simboliai“ (angl. *Images and Symbols*), kuriuose mokslininkas, pasitelkęs fenomenologinį ir istorinį lyginamąjį metodus, tiria „šventybės“ raiškos lauką religijų istorinėje raidoje, analizuoja mitą, archetipus. Eliade's šventybės (*hierofanijos*) tyrimai apima įvairius žmogaus buvimo aspektus – erdvę / vietą, laiką, istoriją ir istoriškumą, simbolius, archetipus. Hierofanija įprasmina perskyrą tarp šventumo (sakralumo) ir materialumo kategorijų, bet sykiu – parodo šventybės atvertis pasaulietiškoje erdvėje, kurioje ji randasi paradoksaliai susijungus šventybei ir pasaulietiskumui, universaliai tiesai ir reliatyvybei. Namai romane „Veidu į tekančią saulę“ (angl. *That They May Face the Rising Sun*), kaip fizinė ir sakralinė erdvė, kaip pamatinė egzistencinė sąvoka, pažymėti dviejų buvimo modų, t. y. dviejų trajektorijų sankirta: viena jų – vertikali – sakralioji (angl. *the sacred*) – sujungia tris kosmogonijas – dangaus, žemės ir požemio laukus, ji priartina (religinę) žmogų (*homo religiosus*) prie dievų ir mirusiųjų pasaulio. Kita – horizontalioji – pasaulietiškoji (angl. *the profane*) žymi desakralizuotą būtį, istoriją, istorinius įvykius, linijinį laiką, kuris, kitaip nei sakralusis laikas, nėra atnaujinamas pirminių archetipų kartotėje. Romano „Veidu į tekančią saulę“ (angl. *That They May Face the Rising Sun*) namų erdvėje būtis atsiveria sakralumo ir pasaulietiskumo įtampoje per universalius, bet ir konkrečios vietos apibrėžtus simbolius, archetipus – hierofanijas; būtis romano namų erdvėje skleidžiasi kaip pirminė tikrovė ir aukščiausioji būtis.

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Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God,
But only he who sees takes off his shoes;
The rest sit round and pluck blackberries
(Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*)

John McGahern's (1934 – 2006) novel *That They May Face the Rising Sun* (2001) honours and celebrates the daily life of a small Irish lakeside community and the old Irish ways where the natural and the social world is reconciled in a narrative microcosm of artistic integrity, which, as Seamus Deane observes, is “a strange and wonderful mixture of various genres of writing – narrative in the basic sense, but also a meditation, a memoir, a retrospect, an anthropological study of a community, a culminating and therapeutic reprise of the author's own career, a celebration of an Ireland that had formerly been the object of chill analysis as well as of loving evocation”¹.

Indeed, unlike his early fiction (*The Barracks* 1963, *The Dark* 1965), (*The Leavetaking* 1975, *The Pornographer* 1975, *Amongst Women* 1990) which is concerned with the physically and psychologically abused individual and the dysfunctional family, the narrative of his final novel *That They May Face the Rising Sun* is the narrative of two lifelines, one of them is of the individual and the other is of the collective; it tells a story of the life of a small Irish rural community as it is lived by Joe and Kate Rutledge who have left London so as to return home to Ireland and make a piece of land with a little farm near the lake their home; Jamesie and Mary Murphy, their hospitable neighbours, who have lived near the lake for all their lives, and Johnny who once left Ireland for England and keeps on returning home every summer; Patrick Ryan, who leaves home and comes back again, and some other memorable characters of the community who have their ways, their daily comings and goings but they all live as a community near the lake as their nature-bound homeland. On the other hand, some of them have a homeplace and rituals of homelife (and death), some of them have a home but are always away from it, while others have never had a homeplace, and they depend on others for it, as well as food. But whatever their ways or comings and goings are they do claim the place they belong to in one or another way and it seems that the place too claims its community; belonging to a place is reciprocal in the narrative which, apart from what has been mentioned, abounds in lyrical descriptions not only of the man made, but also natural world with a lake at its centre, and changing seasons which bring in calving, lambing, haymaking, and Monaghan Day; it also brings in Sunday Mass in a local church, and the quiet celebration of Christmas and Easter and with them, alongside the secular layer, it opens a narrative of religious experience as the meeting point of the profane and the sacred, the temporal and the eternal.

In this context, the homeplace in the narrative of *That They May Face the Rising Sun* is not only a tangible physical and material, and social place (although it is a tribute to McGahern's native County Leitrim), with human and natural history as its principle dimen-

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2002/jan/12/fiction.reviews1>

sion with its custom and tradition, rituals of work and of religious observance, but also, it seems, a place of intangible physical reality where the material reality of the everyday and the ordinary escapes definition as it refuses to be simplified, reduced to a psychological, sociological or historical comment; in other words, the homeplace in *That They May Face the Rising Sun* is a dichotomous place of the ordinary and the extraordinary, of the mundane and the archetypal, the prosaic and the symbolic with the lake at its centre.

The paper will, therefore, seek to answer the question what it is about the place which is the homeplace for the lakeside community that makes it home in the narrative of the novel, i.e. a place which may not be different from all other places qualitatively, yet it is; it is different from all other places in that it is symbolic in its character as it stands for a place that one takes roots, it ensures its lakeside community permanence and stability, and a continuity. In other words, as the paper investigates what it is about the place in the narrative of *That They May Face the Rising Sun* that one calls his home and what it is that substantiates it and being in it and a return to it, it will argue that the homeplace in the narrative is of ontological nature since it is, metaphorically speaking, the place of two trajectories as they cross over, i.e. two modes of *being* in the world – the sacred and the profane. The sacred represents and is equivalent to the *real*, the absolute truth; it is archaic and, therefore, eternal; the profane is equivalent to the *unreal*², the amorphous, the heterogeneous and relative and, therefore, temporal. The homeplace in the narrative of the book is a communal place for each and every character in the book; it is also the place one goes to after death. In building my argument, I draw on Mircea Eliade's hermeneutics in *The Sacred and the Profane* (1959), *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return* (1954), and *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism* (1961).

In Eliade's hermeneutics of the history of religions, the two essential lived experiences in the world, the two existential modes – the sacred and the profane – coexist and manifest each other: “*sacred* and *profane* are the two modes of being in the world, two existential situations assumed by man in the course of his history” (Eliade, 1956, 14). Although, as Eliade formulates, the sacred is the opposite of the profane (*ibid.*, 10) in human spatiality, the two modes of being in the world, the polarity of the sacred and the profane is conceptually co-dependent for the reason that the sacred is hidden in or is a reality beyond the profane since the sacred and the profane exist in a dialectic relationship in all its complexity. The conceptual complexity lies in that the two – the sacred and the profane – being qualitatively different and inherently ambiguous, as the two modalities of being in the world, they, nevertheless, provide (religious) man with a sense of order and meaningful existence in the world³.

For Eliade, the sacred space comes about through what the scholar designates as a *hierophany*. Since the sacred – a hierophany – and the profane contrast, the sacred, when

² For more on the concepts of *real* and *unreal*, see Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane. The Nature of Religion*, pp. 11–13.

³ For more on the controversy of Eliade's work, see David Cave, *Mircea Eliade's Vision for a New Humanism*; also see Chistine Barth, ““In illo tempore, at the Centre of the World”: Mircea Eliade and Religious Studies”, in *Historical Social Research / Historische Sozialforschung*, Vol. 38, No. 3 (145), 59–75; also see David M. Rasmussen, “Mircea Eliade. Structural Hermeneutics and Philosophy”, in *The Blackwell Companion to Hermeneutics*, pp. 404–411.

it manifests itself through the profane, comes about, for example, in stones or trees. A hierophany, it follows, as the intangible and immaterial, is inherently paradoxical because it manifests itself through a material and tangible object which, in its turn, becomes something else, yet it remains what it is as an object and continues to exist in the milieu in which it has always existed. An object retains its material essence with the sacred meaning invested in it. What follows then is that the manifestation of the sacred is, as Eliade says in the quote above, a “mysterious act”; it is, in other words, not a rationally and logically constructed category; it does not lend itself for any reductions. The sacred is irreducible, it escapes simplification, it is universal, and yet local; the sacred manifests itself in many forms of *modus* when and where it chooses to manifest itself.

The examples of *hierophanies* that Eliade provides throughout his work are diverse ranging from the most elementary (a stone or a tree) to what he calls the “supreme” hierophany – the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ:

“From the most elementary hierophany – e.g., manifestation of the sacred in some ordinary object, a stone or a tree – to the supreme hierophany (which, for a Christian, is the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ) there is no solution of continuity. In each case we are confronted by the same mysterious act – the manifestation of something of a wholly different order, a reality that does not belong to our world, in objects that are an integral part of our natural “profane” world” (*ibid.*, 11).

For Eliade, since the sacred manifests itself, it “ontologically founds the world” (*ibid.*, 21); therefore, the manifestation of a hierophany designates and consecrates the lived (homogeneous, chaotic) world around the founded centre which establishes a point of reference, which reveals “an absolute fixed point, a center” (*ibid.*). A fixed point is needed to “acquire orientation in the chaos of homogeneity” (*ibid.*, 23) detaching from the surrounding milieu and making it qualitatively different (*ibid.*, 26), and a fixed point is needed “if the world is to be lived in” (*ibid.*, 23) in a real sense and if the world is to be lived in a real sense, “it must be *founded*” (*ibid.*, 22).

A fixed point, the central axis for orientation, also makes an opening “either upward (the divine world) or downward (the underworld, the world of the dead). The three cosmic levels – earth, heaven, underworld – have been put in communication” (*ibid.*, 36), which in different religions is sometimes delivered through the image of a “universal pillar, *axis mundi*, which at once connects and supports heaven and earth and whose base is fixed in the world below (the infernal regions)” (*ibid.*, 37). The *axis mundi* is a symbol which connects earth with heaven and it comes in many forms, such as a ladder, a mountain, a tree (*ibid.*) or the Golgotha (*ibid.*, 38). The *axis mundi* may also come in the form of a body of water; water is “the pre-formal modality of cosmic matter”, and, at the same time, the world of death, of all that precedes and follows life” (*ibid.*, 41); its position within the communication between the lower world and earth substantiates a different ontological status.

From all that has been said, it follows that for Eliade the sacred is communicated through symbols – hierophanies – which, being multifold inherently in terms of space and time, are also universal and, yet, singular and local. Being dialectical and equivocal,

symbols substantiate and nourish symbolic thinking which is the principle mode of how people orient themselves within space and time and what points of reference and orientation they privilege in their habitation and its cosmological symbolism. As man (*homo religiosus*)⁴ lives his symbols, the everyday lived experience gives meaning to his life; man, as a symbol making being, makes sense of the world through symbols. Since man's being in the world is the being within the sacred and profane trajectories (the vertical and the horizontal), the sacred does not imply a belief in (Christian) God, but it does not refute it either; it is essentially a qualitative state which qualifies the profane. The two – the sacred and the profane – interact in that the sacred is inseparable from the materiality of the profane, as it is hidden in its everyday existence, and the profane and the ordinary are invested and replete with symbolic meaning.

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To quote John Berger⁵, home is “the centre of the world” because it is a place where two lines – the vertical and the horizontal – cross over:

“The vertical line was a path leading upwards to the sky and downwards to the underworld. The horizontal line represented the traffic of the world, all the possible roads leading across the earth to other places. Thus, at home, one was nearest to the gods in the sky and to the dead of the underworld. This nearness promised access to both. And at the same time, one was at the starting point and, hopefully, the returning point of all terrestrial journeys” (Berger, 1992, 52).

Indeed, the vertical line is what Eliade defines as the central axis for orientation, which is not only a fixed point but also an opening made “either upward (the divine world) or downward (the underworld, the world of the dead). The three “cosmic levels – earth, heaven, underworld – have been put in communication” (Eliade, 1956, 36); the three cosmic levels are the symbolic markers of what Eliade calls the *axis mundi*, the centre of the world.

In the novel *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, the three cosmic levels, the three cosmic geographies – heaven, earth and underworld – as the symbolic markers of the *axis mundi* and human life, coexist in the lived space around the lake as a homeplace for all the characters in the novel: individually and as a community they are a traditional and archaic⁶ society that lives in accordance with natural cycles and religious rituals and

⁴ *Homo religiosus* is not a religion proper bound individual; no single belief is favoured over another.

⁵ For more on Berger's commentary on Eliade's hermeneutics of world religions, see John Berger, *And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos*, 1992.

⁶ Eliade uses the concept of ‘archaic’ as all ‘original’ human societies of any stage in history that embody ‘traditional’ outlook. Traditional or archaic societies, as Eliade argues, revolt against concrete, historical time, they enact a cyclical return to the “mythical time of the beginning of things” (Eliade, 2005, 34-35; 91-92). In his study called *Mircea Eliade's Vision for a New Humanism* (1993), David Cave suggests: “The mythic consciousness has undergone various modifications and transformations from the traditional, archaic, societies to the modern, secular, scientific ones. The alteration in the mythic consciousness is not just chronological, however, since the archaic does not principally refer to a point in time but to a structure of the mind” (p.71).

holidays which sanction their collective past and present: “The plum trees blossomed, then the apple came and the white brilliance of the pear tree. May came in wet and windy” (McGahern, 2002, 263); “The gaiety of spirit grew as Christmas approached” (*ibid.*, 205).

Indeed, the reality they live in is the reality acquired solely and symbolically through memory, repetition or participation, i.e. in all the characters in the novel do – walk and work the fields, make hay, attend to calving, lambing, and bury the dead – they repeat what has already been done before them by other generations; therefore, since what has already been done is repeated, a certain ritual repetition is enacted, which is suggestive of the mundane and the archetypal: “Go ahead. There’s nothing new in the world. And we forget. We’ll hear it again”, Patrick Ryan demanded” (*ibid.*, 84). In one way or another, the lakeside community, as the traditional and archaic collective, follows and enacts a certain exemplary model since “everything which lacks an exemplary model “lacks reality” (Eliade, 2005, 34). Put in other words, viewed from the perspective of archaic cosmogony, human acts in the narrative of the book are the repeated actions initiated by others, i.e. human acts are paradigmatically meaningful as they reproduce a primordial act, repeat a mythical example. And since they, as a community, repeat a mythical example, they construct their world according to archetype, the initial alignment of the sacred. And as they construct their world according to archetype, they organize a space/ a territory by making it their own, for example, by settling into or adjusting to or growing into it.

Settlement, as Eliade argues in his work on the history of world religions, is equivalent to an act of Creation (*ibid.*, 31). Since human beings cannot live in chaos, man, as he is settling in a territory, he is cosmicizing it, i.e. man symbolically transforms it into “cosmos through a ritual repetition of cosmogony. What is to become “our world” must first be “created”, and every creation has a paradigmatic model – the creation of the universe by the gods” (Eliade, 1956, 31). As Joe and Kate Ruttledge, leaving their career in advertising, return home to Ireland from England for good, and as Joe and Kate Ruttledge settle down near the lake, they naturally seek to organize their homeplace first, inhabit and “create” it, to make it theirs, and to make it theirs, it has to be created “anew, that is, by consecrating it” (*ibid.*, 32). To make it theirs, to organize a space, a homeplace, is to invest in the *axis mundi*, which not only connects, as it has already been mentioned in this paper, heaven and earth and the underworld, if it is to be viewed from the perspective of archaic cosmology, but also fixes the limits for the habitable world to extend around it. Man fixes the limits of his microcosm, his *axis mundi*, the centre of the world. According to Eliade, it is there, in that centre, “that the sacred manifests itself in its totality” (Eliade, 1961, 39), and – plurality, since a sacred place, which is either consecrated by a hierophany, or ritually constructed, is the point of intersections of the three cosmic geographies – those of heaven, earth and hell (*ibid.*, 40), and, therefore, is plural. Heaven and earth meet at the intersection between the two symbolic geographies within Joe’s shed – “the cathedral” that he is building:

“Once they started nailing the rafters, the frame to hold the roof took shape. Each new rafter formed its own square or rectangle, and from the ground they all held their own measure of sky; in the outer rectangles leaves from branches of overhanging ash and sycamore were mixed with the sky.

‘What are you looking at, lad?’

‘At how the rafters frame the sky. How the squares of light are more interesting than the open sky. They make it look more human by reducing the sky, and then the whole sky grows out from that small space’ (McGahern, 2002, 71).

Settlement, building a dwelling place is, therefore, tending towards the *axis mundi*, towards one's own centre along one axis, i.e. the axis of the three cosmic regions: heaven and earth, and hell. Joe and Kate Rutledges' house, alongside the shed – “the cathedral”, is situated at one and the same point, which is the centre of the world, the *axis mundi* in the narrative of the novel. But, as Patrick Ryan, who is hired to build the shed, is almost never home, the process of building of the shed – “the cathedral” is infinitely slow: “I see the cathedral is coming along”, the Shah said [...] “Probably it'll stay that way for a while now, he's gone again. God knows when he'll be back” (*ibid.*, 89). On the other hand, the construction of the shed, which is an extension to the dwelling house, as the construction of the *axis mundi* in one's own house, is significant and suggestive of what Eliade defines as calling “attention to something in the human condition” – “the nostalgia for Paradise” (Eliade, 1961, 55). It is man's ontological quest to settle in the *axis mundi*, to “transcend the human condition” (Eliade, 1961, 55), otherwise, man's ontological substance is depreciated by erosion and exhaustion. Man's existence in historical and profane time is “ontologically a non-existence, an unreality” (Eliade, 1961, 67). When Johnny returns home for one of his summers, Patrick Ryan mercilessly attacks Johnny:

“‘You made the mistake of your life when you left here. You were in paradise and didn't know it. You went and threw it all away.’

‘Maybe I did make a mistake,’ Johnny assented blankly as if blankness alone could turn aside the judgment.’ Anyhow it's done now’ (McGahern, 2002, 79).

Nostalgia for the lost Paradise is multivalent in the narrative; the building of the shed – “the cathedral”, as an attempt to re-establish communication with heaven and earth, is one of its manifestations. Building a shed is, indeed, by every means, a very slow, but also a creative act in the novel, it is a hopeful act. It, as it has already been mentioned in this paper, intentionally repeats a cosmogonic act, the primordial creative moment; it is a cosmogony which is being repeated and relived and, as an archetypal model is being repeated, relived and, therefore, imitated through the deliberate building of the shed – “the cathedral”, the mythical moment when the archetype was revealed for the first time is reactualized (Eliade, 2005, 82).

What is also reactualized alongside is mythical time; mythical time, being reversible by its very nature, is a mythical time made present and, therefore, real; to put it differently, mythical time symbolizes the reactualization of a “sacred event that took place in a mythical past, “in the beginning” (Eliade, 1956, 69). It also allows abolishing profane time at least symbolically. The construction work of the shed – “the cathedral”, which is extended throughout the narrative and is not finished by its end, is a reactualization of the primordial, non-temporal, event, a moment of sacred time. And as it is the reactualization of the primordial event in the narrative, it, in terms of time and space, seems to be

continually persisting in between two planes of time – sacred and profane; the sacred as recoverable, reversible, and eternal and the mythic (and symbolic) as it coexists within the historical present, which is temporal and, therefore, profane. Kate Ruttledge in her conversation with Patrick Ryan, the shed – the “cathedral” builder, puts this in her own way of thought saying: “The past and present are all the same in the mind” (McGahern, 2002, 77). Indeed, what Kate Ruttledge is saying is that sacred time “always remains equal to itself, it neither changes nor is exhausted” (Eliade, 1956, 69). It is a non-temporal time, a time without duration.

The sacred time and its inside independent structure that everyone lives within the lakeside community exists within profane time which is temporal and historical and, therefore, linear. Both Joe and Patrick, as they renew the construction of the shed – “the cathedral” each time Patrick returns home – “We’ll go back to work in the name of God and his Blessed Mother” (McGahern, 2002, 77); “Tomorrow we’ll make a start, in the name of the Lord, and we’ll not quit until that whole cathedral of a shed is finished” (*ibid.*, 314) – they enact the repeated and cyclical return to the beginning. Each of their return is in one or another way meaningfully ritualistic since by enacting mythic archetypes one escapes into mythical time away from profane time and, therefore, meaninglessness. Building of a shed – “the cathedral” in the novel is a creative and meaningful act since it has an ontological significance for present action.

The ontological value of the dwelling place functions in the same way as sacred time since it is time during which a mythical ritual is imitated. The lakeside community seems to be living in time qualitatively and substantially different from historical and profane time, and that reality for them is a reality which is substantially different from the reality as we know it, i.e. as the reality which is the “manifestation of something of a wholly different order, a reality that does not belong to our world” (Eliade, 1956, 11). When Jimmie asks Joe Ruttledge what went wrong in England, Joe explains:

“‘[...] it’s not my country and I never feel it’s quite *real* or that my life there is *real* [...] You never feel responsible or fully involved in anything that happens. It’s like being present and at the same time a real part of you is happily absent.’ ‘Would you find this place *real*?’ ‘Far too *real*’“(McGahern, 2002, 20; emphasis added).

For the archaic lakeside community “the *sacred* is equivalent [...] to *reality*” (Eliade, 1956, 12) wherein the *real* is the sacred. The homeplace around the lake which is one of the central archetypal symbols in the narrative, in which a homeplace is the value granted to the lived space which has the power to shape the mode of being of its inhabitants, and its inhabitants, too, reciprocate the claim of the lived space as it is, what Eliade calls, the Centre of the World for them, it is their *axis mundi*. The Ruttledge house, the central social-placial axis in the novel, is where everyone comes for whatever one wants to come: whenever Jamesie visits Ruttledges for a neighbourly conversation, Kate always offers him a whiskey: “‘Jamesie,’ they said. ‘You are welcome, very welcome.’ In his Sunday suit he was shining and handsome. [...] ‘Would you like a whiskey?’ Kate smiled [...] ‘Now you’re getting down to business, Kate [...]’” (*ibid.*, 251-252); when Bill Evans enters the

house, he is always offered some food and cigarettes as he leaves it: "Tea was made. Milk and several spoons of sugar wee added to the tea and stirred. The tea and biscuits were placed on a low stool beside the rocking chair. He ate and drank greedily, [...] Ruttledge gave him five loose cigarettes that had been placed in a corner of the dresser" [...] (*ibid.*, 8-9); when the notorious and brutal and sexually abusive John Quinn makes his presence, he is also accepted and welcomed and offered a treat: "He was invited and offered tea or whiskey" (*ibid.*, 23), and the like. The hospitality of the Ruttledges is extended each time their home is visited; everyone is mutually accepted without judgment. Their openness to each other, their acceptance of each other and each other's faults is a moral imperative that they observe as an archaic community. It, therefore, seems that the homeplace as the sacred modality of existence is not only a material object which has a shape of a dwelling structure – it is inherently existential since it has a religious significance as the habitation is the symbolic installation of the *axis mundi*.

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The architectonic symbolism of the *axis mundi* of the habitable world within the narrative of *That They May Face the Rising Sun* is geographically (land)marked with the symbols which the *axis mundi*, a sacred center, epitomizes. It is not only the house as a human dwelling structure that is assimilated to the symbolical *axis mundi* in the narrative of the novel, it is also the church as one of the central architectonic symbols of the *axis mundi*, one of "the specific characteristics of traditional societies" (Eliade, 1956, 43) which is the sacred pole and the ceremonial house to the universe "to support the sky" (*ibid.*, 36) and earth and whose "base is fixed in the world below (the infernal regions)" (*ibid.*, 37). The church in the narrative – "The church was in darkness but there was a light above the door of the presbytery. It was a strange place to have built this church and presbytery, far from human habitation [...]" (McGahern, 2002, 225) – very much like the shed – "the cathedral" that Joe and Patrick are building receives as much valorization as Joe's shed, in fact. Although the church (temple – basilica – cathedral) – from the perspective of the cosmological structure – is defined as the house of the gods, hence holy place above all others since it resanctifies the world, they both – the church and the shed – the "cathedral" in the narrative – are situated on the same axis; and both are inseparably connected (not necessarily geometrically, they are connected existentially), and form a symbolic system which nurtures the reality and its validity for the lakeside community taken individually and collectively. On the other hand, the church as one of the architectonic symbols of the *axis mundi* in the narrative is the only symbol, a hierophany, which, unlike all other symbols (hill, lake, etc.), which are more universal rather than local, and are inherently of a trans-spatial (i.e. transcending space) and trans-temporal (i.e. transcending time) quality, is the symbol which potentially is history-bound, i.e. it points to a history, a concrete historical context. It therefore, follows that there are two symbolic systems in the narrative of the novel: the trans-spatial and trans-temporal, and contextually limited, but, yet, on the other hand, they both manifest the sacred.

The sacred (the church, the temple, etc.) and the profane (history or “the terror of history”) are not divided “according to a presupposed ontology” (Eliade, 2005, 156). It has not been once in human history that “the secular or the profane – the ostensibly irreligious and meaningless profane – proves to be more just than the supposed religious or sacred center. The church often perpetuates the grossest injustices; mystics can be calloused to human suffering. The center one occupies, therefore, is defined, limited, and potentially reformed by other centers along one’s periphery” (*ibid.*, 164). In the narrative of the novel, the institutionalized physical and sexual abuse by members of Catholic religious orders upon homeless children⁷ comes in the narrative line of Bill Evans who

“would have not known neither father nor mother. As a baby he would have been given into the care of nuns. When these boys reached seven, the age of reason, they were transferred to places run by priests or Brothers. When he reached fourteen, Bill Evans was sent out, like many others, to his first farmer. They were also sent as skivvies to the colleges; they scrubbed and polished floors, emptied garbage and waited at tables in the college Rutledge attended [...]” (*ibid.*, 10-11).

In the narrative of the book, since no one is judgmental against anyone – “We all want our own shoes of life. If truth was told, none of us would swap with anybody. We want to go out the way we came in” (McGahern, 2002, 66) – and no charges are placed against the historical past and its injustices (political or religious) – “There’s nothing right or wrong in this world. Only what happens” (*ibid.*, 58) – it seems that the archaic lakeside community, to ensure their survival, has made a collective choice to transcend their historical condition, i.e. to overcome historical determinism and shape and nurture the sacred dimension of their existence, to nurture a past that is mythical, unhistorical rather than historical and, therefore, profane.

On the other hand, the community collectively and individually acknowledges and is aware of and confronted with historical and profane time and its political and social pressures, such as immigration: “The whole country was leaving for England at the time” (*ibid.*, 5). And, although, the “terror of history”, to borrow Eliade’s concept, or certain definite historical events force some of the members of the community to leave it for a better life outside their home world – ““Do you regret having left?” ‘Many times over. The whole country was leaving then and I passed no heed. I didn’t even have to leave like most of the rest” (*ibid.*, 278) – the community remains anchored to their homeplace. On the other hand, it also seems that even those who have left Ireland for England keep on returning home, their ontological, existential anchor: Johnny, Jamesie’s brother, left his homeplace for England but keeps on coming home every summer. Jamesie and his wife Mary always heartily welcome him: “The house and the outhouses would be freshly white-washed for the homecoming, the street swept, the green gates painted [...] the holy pictures and the

⁷ For more on two official reports, issued by the Irish government in 2009, concerning the Catholic Church and documented instances of physical and sexual abuses see: Andrew Auge, Louise Fuller, John Littleton, Eamon Maher, “After the Ryan and Murphy Reports: A Roundtable on the Irish Catholic Church”, in *New Hibernia Review*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (Spring 2010), pp. 59-77. Also see Diarmaid Ferriter, *Occasions of Sin: Sex and Society in Modern Ireland* (2009) and *The Transformation of Ireland: 1900-2000* (2004).

wedding photographs would be taken down, the glass wiped and polished" (*ibid.*, 4). It is the nostalgia for his home, although not explicitly expressed in the narrative, which brings him home for good eventually – "There's a big differ between visiting and belonging" (*ibid.*, 99) – by the end of the book. Despite the (contemporary) historical context – the "terror of history" (as Eliade terms it) – in which man is placed, the homeplace always remains an "absolute reality, *the sacred*, which transcends this world but manifests itself in this world, thereby sanctifying it and making it *real*" (Eliade, 1956, 202). Johnny returns home, a sacred space, the place which provides ontological orientation "for nothing can begin, nothing can be done, without a previous orientation" (*ibid.*, 21).

The pressure of contemporary history upon the archaic and traditional community in the narrative comes also in specific symbols such as telephone poles. When Jamesie and Mary, Joe and Kate see the number of the telephone poles going up every day in around and alongside the lake, they, for some reason, take it quietly:

"Did you see the telephone poles?" Ruttledge asked. 'Saw them, saw them early this morning,' he stretched out his great hand. 'They all went up today. They have machines, diggers, everything'" (McGahern, 2002, 304).

The telephone poles as the emblematic symbol of history and modernity seems to be invested with the function of a symbolical reference point, which, paradoxically, if viewed from the perspective of religious man (*homo religiosus*), is a marker of the break in space when a hierophany manifests itself. The manifestation of the sacred – a hierophany – in a profane and desacralized space ontologically founds the world (Eliade, 1956, 21). If the telephone poles are to be interpreted as the points of reference and the orientating markers of modernity and, therefore, profanity, they must be manifestations of history, of 'becoming' rather than 'being' because it is 'becoming' which threatens "archaic ontology" (Eliade, 2005, 11): "one that claims that proper human axis in all its modalities repeats the models provided by divine activities as displayed in myths" (*ibid.*, 11). It is the archaic ontology that the lakeside community emblemizes in the ways that they know. When at the opening of the novel, Jamesie visits Joe and Kate Ruttledge, his neighbours, Jamesie says what he knows and what he knows is that "you nearly have to be born into a place to know what's going on and what to do" (McGahern, 2002, 3). It is exactly the same phrase he brings Kate by the very end of the book (*ibid.*, 252). In other words, archaic ontology is about man *being* made rather than man *making himself* (Eliade, 2005, 13-14): "The archaic man acknowledges no act which has not been previously posited and lived by someone else, some other being who was not a man. What he does has been done before. His life is the ceaseless repetition of gestures initiated by others" (*ibid.*).

On the other hand, the fact that the telephone poles go up extending round the lake in lines seems to be suggesting that they are the points of reference of profane activities that are there to homogenize space and make it neutral: "[...] for profane experience, on the contrary, space is homogeneous and neutral; no break qualitatively differentiates the various parts of its mass" (Eliade, 1956, 22). For one or another reason, the lakeside community takes the arrival of modernity neutrally, they do not reflect upon its consequences upon

their community. But what follows from this so far is that the home world of the lakeside community is the world of the archaic and traditional society that is, it seems, is entrusted with some knowledge that only they have. And if history enters their home world, it cannot “basically modify the structure of an archaic symbolism. History constantly adds new meanings, but they do not destroy the structure of the symbol” (*ibid.*, 137).

And as an archaic community which holds on together under pressure of contemporary history as it imposes itself upon a community in many forms, immigration and telephone poles among them, it seeks to preserve their mythical time against history and historical time, it attempts at holding on to their sacred history and time (*ibid.*, 95), i.e. the time which is cyclical and sacred, to follow Eliade, and infinite. On the other hand, mythological time coexists with chronological time; sacred time coexists in and is known in profane time. The community individually and collectively lives to the validity of their time. When Jamesie and Mary leave for Dublin for the whole week of Christmas, and as Kate and Joe Rutledge look after their house throughout the time of their absence, they notice that: “no two clocks were the same or told the same time but all were running” (McGahern, 2002, 218). It is “their” time that they entrust each other with to guard. Soon after Johnny’s death, a few days after the funeral, when the Rutledges go to see how Jamesie and Mary are, they find that the clocks had been removed from the walls, the clockmaker was invited to get them all looked at: “Several of them haven’t been telling the right time in years,’ Jamesie said in a rush of words” (*ibid.*, 304). And when finally the clockmaker has them strike the hour together, Jamesie reflects on the job the clocks in their house did: “I suppose they should be sold or thrown out and new clocks bought but they will be kept for our time” (*ibid.*, 309). It seems that the clocks in the narrative, as the symbolical markers of the (archaic) present, have been the clocks that marked “our time”, as Jamesie says, the time of some different order rather than “today’s historical time that is experienced” (Eliade, 1956, 72). When Mary says: “they’d have a tale to tell if they could speak” (McGahern, 2002, 309), Jamesie adds to it: “All they said was tick-tock. Tick-tock. Pass no heed. Tick-tock. Say no bad. Tick-tock. Turn a blind eye. Tick-tock. Get into no trouble. Tick-tock. Put the hands over. Tick-tock. Don’t press too hard. Tick-tock. As why not but never why” (*ibid.*).

If repetition (of symbolic content) is emblematic of regeneration and re-creation of the world as it is viewed from the perspective of cosmogony, the repetitive ‘tick-tock’ in the quote is emblematic of the mythical representation of time; repetition then is a return to the beginning, to the original time; the rhythmic ‘tick-tock’ functions here to re-create mythical time in the narrative, to make a thing present as a reminder of what Eliade calls “*ab origine, in illo tempore*” (Eliade, 1956, 70). ‘Tick-tock’ is the maker of the mythical present as it manifests itself through the historical present. As Joe and Mary have their clocks restored by the clockmaker, it is as if they have time recovered, reversed, and at the same time it is a reminder that time for (religious) man who belongs to an archaic community is not continuous; and it is also a reminder that (religious) man lives in between sacred and profane time, with an essential difference between the two being in that sacred time is reversible as every religious festival, liturgical time, represents and enacts a sacred

event that took place in the past, “in the beginning”. This time, as Eliade suggests, “is an ontological, Parmenidean time; it always remains equal to itself, it neither changes nor is exhausted” (*ibid.*, 69).

A time which remains equal to itself is a liturgical time which in the narrative of the book is reactualized at Christmas – “I find it hard to believe it is Christmas Day and that there are just the two of us,” Kate said when they rose in the morning” (McGahern, 2002, 210) – and Easter: “Easter morning came clear. There was no wind on the lake. There was also a great stillness. When the bells rang out for Mass, the strokes trembling on the water, they had the entire Easter world to themselves” (*ibid.*, 251). But it is the New Year season (during the twelve days between Christmas and Epiphany) during which as Jamesie and Mary leave for Dublin and Joe and Kate, as they look after their house in the time of their absence, also wind the clocks as “no two clocks were the same or told the same time but all were running. Each one had its separate presence and charm” (*ibid.*, 218). As the clock time is restored and renewed, so is the world annually with the New Year season, as it, as Eliade explains, signifies the hope that “the abolition of time is possible at this mythical moment, in which the world is destroyed and re-created” (Eliade, 2005, 72), “the world is renewed”, “with each new year it recovers its original sanctity, the sanctity that it possessed when it came from the Creator’s hands” (Eliade, 1956, 75). And it is after Easter, soon after Johnny’s death, that Jamesie and Mary remove the clocks from the walls altogether. And if the argument is further to be built on Eliade’s hermeneutics of archaic ontology, Easter and New Year’s Day are “the habitual dates for baptism in primitive Christianity. (Baptism is equivalent to the ritual death of the old man followed by a new birth. On the cosmic level, it is equivalent to the deluge: abolition of contours, fusion of all forms, return to the formless)” (Eliade, 2005, 69), then what is it that is suggestive of whatever it is there to come to abolish contours, to fuse all forms and to return to the formless? Johnny returns home from England soon after Easter – “Welcome home, Johnny. Welcome as the flowers in June” (McGahern, 2002, 279) – as part of his regular annual return but, as it turns out, it is his terrestrial homecoming journey that he accomplishes once he is finally home; home as the starting point and the returning point after all earthly journeys. When the night before Johnny dies, Joe Rutledge takes him to town as he himself has a few things to get around the town and is about to leave Johnny chatting with Luke at the pub, Johnny asks Joe: “There’s no chance you’d leave me, Joe? You wouldn’t forget to collect me?” (*ibid.*). Joe does not leave him and never intended to, and neither does Joe leave Johnny when the time comes to lay the body out: “I’ll lay Johnny out,” Rutledge offered” (*ibid.*, 286).

As Joe Rutledge and Tom Kelly prepare Johnny’s body for burial, Joe respectfully attends to Johnny’s body, to the sanctity of the body as it takes in both the sacred and the profane:

“They closed the ears and the nostrils with the cotton wool, and when they turned him over to close the rectum, dentures fell from his mouth. The rectum absorbed almost all the cotton wool. The act was intimate and warm as the act of sex. The innate sacredness of each single life stood out more starkly in death than in the whole of its natural life” (*ibid.*, 288).

The human body along with the house, the temple (church), and the universe, as Eliade formulates, are the forms of cosmos with a passage from one mode of being to another, from one existential situation to another: “Man passes from pre-life to life and finally to death” as the “sun passes from darkness to light” (Eliade, 1956, 180). Death, to further quote Eliade,

“[...] comes to be regarded as the supreme initiation, that is, as the beginning of a new spiritual existence [...] Generation, death, and regeneration (= rebirth) were understood as three moments in a single mystery, and the entire spiritual effort of archaic man was exerted to show that there must be no intervals between these moments. One cannot *stay* in one of the three. Movement, regeneration continues perpetually. Man constantly re-performs the cosmogony – the paradigmatic making – in order to be sure that he is making something well” (*ibid.*, 196-97).

As a “new birth”, the initiation ritual includes a ritual death and resurrection. When the men – Joe Rutledge, Patrick Ryan, Jamesie and Big Mick Maddden – gather to dig the grave for Johnny, Patrick soon points at how they marked the grave wrong: “We have put the head where the feet should go” (McGahern, 2002, 296). Rutledge asks Joe what difference it makes if Johnny’s head lies in the west, to that Patrick replies:

“You should know, lad,” he said [...]

“The world is full of things I don’t know,” Rutledge said.

“He sleeps with his head in the west ... so that when he wakes he may face the rising sun [...] We look to the resurrection of the dead” (*ibid.*, 297).

What Joe Patrick says is in fact something fundamental existentially – death is followed by resurrection, therefore, death is not a defeat, it is annulled and transcended, and eternity wins over time.

The sacrality of human body as one of the modalities of the sacred, hence of *being* in the novel is central to the archaic cosmological scheme and also – the architectonic symbolism of the Centre of the World, alongside house, temple or church. Put differently, it is not only the house as a human dwelling structure that is assimilated to the symbolical *axis mundi* in the narrative of the novel, and the church as one of the central architectonic symbols of the Centre of the World, it is also the hill (the mountain) that the characters in the novel go either up or down in their comings and goings around and alongside the lake – “Johnny was climbing the hill slowly, pausing many times, a small dark figure on the pale pass shadowed by the whitethorns” (*ibid.*, 282) – that adds to the multiplicity of centers and, therefore, the image of the world on smaller scales reaffirms the *axis mundi* in the narrative. Viewed from the perspective of archaic ontology, the hill (or mountain) as an architectonic *terra mater* symbol – where heaven and earth meet – binds the three cosmic regions: heaven, earth, and the underworld; and also simultaneously connects the two vaults: i.e. the celestial and the aquatic.

The aquatic symbolism in the spatial geography of the novel is manifested and communicated through the valorization of the lake which ties in all the disseminated enfolding symbolism of the Center of the World, the *axis mundi* of the home in the narrative: “The morning was clear. There was no wind on the lake. There was also a great stillness. When

the bells rang out for Mass, the strokes trembling on the water, they had the entire world to themselves" (*ibid.*, 1). As the lake in the narrative symbolically marks the structural references of orientation, its rhythmic and repetitive presence from the opening pages of the book to its very closure seems to be serving a message which very much resonates with the message in the Book of Genesis, as it is quoted by Eliade in his works on world religions: "The waters existed before the earth (as in Genesis, 1,2, "Darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters") (Eliade, 1956, 129). The lake, as a point of reference, viewed from the perspective of archaic ontology, and as it marks the opening and the closure of the narrative – which, as Seamus Deane called, is the "narrative in the basic sense, but also a meditation, a memoir, a retrospect, an anthropological study of a community, a culminating and therapeutic reprise of the author's own career, a celebration of an Ireland that had formerly been the object of chill analysis as well as of loving evocation"⁸, symbolizes "the reservoir", to borrow Eliade's concept, "of all the possibilities of existence"; "it precedes every form and supports every creation"; it signifies "regression to the pre-formal, reincorporation into the undifferentiated mode of pre-existence" (Eliade, 1956, 130). The repetitive presence of the lake as a central symbol within the aquatic symbolism in the novel (alongside its diverse biological ecosystems) is emblematic of regeneration and re-creation, of death and rebirth; as Eliade explains, contact with water is regenerative – "on the one hand because dissolution is followed by a new birth, on the other because immersion fertilizes and multiplies the potential life" (*ibid.*). Indeed, the lake nourishes and regenerates its diverse life of plants (honeysuckle, foxgloves, small wild strawberries, green vetches, young alders, fields overgrown with rushes etc.) and birds (swans and their cygnets, herons etc.); it also regenerates and re-creates the cosmogonic act in that the world, as Eliade writes, is regenerated each time the hierogamy is imitated, i.e. "each time matrimonial union is accomplished" (*ibid.*, 42).

The lake in the novel, as a (matrimonial) passage to the celestial vault, and as a celestial reflector – "The morning wind from the lake that lifted the curtains had died. The water was like glass, reflecting the clear sky on either side of a sparkling river of light from a climbing sun" (McGahern, 2002, 110) – symbolically marks the infinite and, therefore, cosmologically speaking, the transcendent. The celestial vault, with its sidereal time, represents the absolute reality for man. It is the celestial vault, the sky, a dimension inaccessible to man as a human being, as Eliade notices in his hermeneutics (Eliade, 1956, 118) that belongs to gods since the cosmos is paradigmatic work of gods. As the narrative of homecoming in the novel draws to the end, it is from the sky that Jamesie and Mary disappear (an unexpected twist in the narrative) –

"As Kate and Mary drew close they embraced, and the Rutledges went quickly down towards the lake. When they were close to the gate, they heard a call or a cry from the hill and turned around. Jamesie and Mary stood framed in the light [...] Mary, and then Jamesie, disappeared from the sky. [...] At the porch, before entering the house, they both turned to look back across the lake, even though they knew that both Jamesie and Mary had long since disappeared from the sky"(McGahern, 2002, 312-14).

⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2002/jan/12/fiction.reviews1>

That Jamesie and Mary disappear into the sky and from it altogether, is – viewed from the perspective of archaic ontology – suggestive of the manifestation of the sacred – *hierophany* – as “the manifestation of something of a wholly different order, a reality that does not belong to our world” (Eliade, 1956, 11). And if it is Jamesie and Mary who are the last ones to bid farewell to Ruttledges as the homecoming narrative closes, it was Jamesie who was the one to open it: “The doors of the house were open. Jamesie entered without knocking and came in noiselessly until he stood in the doorway of the large room where the Ruttledges were sitting” (McGahern, 2002, 1). It is in the doorway that Jamesie stands, i.e. it is the threshold and the threshold, according to Eliade, is “the limit, the boundary, the frontier that distinguishes and opposes two worlds” (Eliade, 1956, 25) – the sacred and the profane, and “at the same time the paradoxical place where those worlds communicate, where passage from the profane to the sacred world becomes possible” (*ibid.*). The threshold is a reference point, which marks the solution of continuity in space; therefore, it is a symbol of religious experience and at the same times a “vehicle of *passage* from the one space to the other” (*ibid.*). Once Jamesie and Mary – the manifestation of the sacred – *hierophany* – have accomplished their work, they depart through the *passage*, i.e. the threshold, yet in other words, “it is as if the gods had created the world in such a way that it could not but reflect their existence; for no world is possible without verticality, and that dimension alone is enough to evoke transcendence” (*ibid.*, 129).

In this context, the homeplace in the narrative of *That They May Face the Rising Sun* is a place which is marked with two lifelines or two existential modes of being that cross one over the other, i.e. the vertical line – the *axis mundi* – the sacred – as a passage upwards to the sky and downwards to the underworld – that crosses over with the horizontal line – the profane as it extends and reciprocates modernity and historical time. But it is only within the home of the lakeside community in the narrative that the two lifelines – the sacred and the profane – cross and co-exist, paradoxically. The vertical – the *axis mundi* – cannot be removed from its fixed point, and once it cannot be removed, the one who leaves home, no longer has an access to continuity between the living and the dead, and the gods. As for the horizontal line, it exists in a dialectic relationship with the vertical line in all its complexity. The two – the sacred and the profane – as two existential modalities of being in the world, affirm the modalities of being and of sacrality: home in the novel *That They May Face the Rising Sun* is the place where ontophany and hierophany meet. On the other hand, home in the narrative of the novel is a communal place, but it is also the place where one goes after death. Home in the novel is a sacred centre amidst the profane milieu, it is the *axis mundi*, the centre of the world; it is a place of one’s beginning and ending, and resurrection, so that he may face the rising sun again.

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